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Articles in Today's Clips

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How much effort we should put into child protection?

Sunday, July 09, 2006 - By Sharon Emery

Two dead children are haunting Michigan lawmakers.

Ricky Holland, 7, of Williamston, who may have been bludgeoned to death with a hammer last July.

And Rose Kelley-Bowen, who got sick but was left untreated in her garbage-strewn Flint home. Police said the 5-year-old was dead when they arrived June 3, the only perceptible movement being her hair as the lice marched through it.

Prosecutors say both died as a result of what their parents did or failed to do. Both children were known to the state's child protection system. To neighbors. But somehow Rose and Ricky ended up dead.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm's Department of Human Services said it would immediately review its actions and make changes, if needed.

Republicans in the House convened a Special Committee on Child Protection after Ricky's body, wrapped in a garbage bag, was found buried in a shallow grave in January. When Rep. David Law, R-Commerce Township, was named to head the panel in March, he laid out its charge: "We owe it to children who still may be in dangerous situations to find out what went wrong and make immediate adjustments."

But now Rose is dead, too, and frustration is rising among committee members, Reps. Barb Vander Veen, R-Allendale, Jack Hoogendyk, R-Kalamazoo, Bill McConico, D-Detroit, and Stephen Adamini, D-Marquette.

They are beating on the door of Verlie Ruffin, the state's children's ombudsman, for details. The office was created in 1994 to independently investigate complaints regarding children in the care of DHS due to abuse or neglect.

But with Ruffin declining to turn over documents, saying it would be illegal at this point, the committee is calling louder for the ombudsman to be placed under legislative oversight. They argue that it's impossible for the actions of the Granholm-appointed DHS director's agency to be objectively investigated by the Granholm-appointed children's ombudsman.

"As long as the (Office of Children's Ombudsman) is part of the executive office, the ombudsman will not be independent," former GOP Rep. Loren Hager, who championed children's issues during his six years in the Legislature, told the committee in June.

Hager, a lawmaker while Republican John Engler was governor and then Democrat Granholm, says neither was interested in strengthening the office, and he noted a general lack of interest in child protection across politics.

Referring to the upcoming campaign season, Hager asked: "Will it be an issue? Will the safety of children even be discussed?"

Indeed, why isn't there a standing committee on child protection instead of a hastily called panel every time there's a headline-grabbing death?

Why isn't there a group of lawmakers reading every word of the reports already released by the Auditor General's Office, the Child Death Review Team, the children's ombudsman, the Foster Care Review Board? Armed with that knowledge, lawmakers, working with state officials, could sit down and say, OK, this is what we think we need to do -- and do it.

Then when something goes wrong, and of course it will because no public policy is perfect, they retool and try again.

Child protection should be an issue that no one takes their eyes off. Not ever. Not even us, me and you.

When something doesn't look right with a child, it should be reported at the state's child abuse hotline, (800) 942-4357. You can even do it anonymously, although your name will always be confidential.

So-called "mandated reporters" of abuse or neglect -- teachers, doctors, social workers -- should be thoroughly educated on what's required of them and consistently suffer the consequences if they don't.

As for Hager, his questions ultimately fell in an emotional tumble:

"Has the culture reached a point where we can't protect children anymore?"

"Does citizen awareness even exist?"

"Why don't we give it a higher priority?"

Those are questions that should haunt us all.

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Ricky's school records to be allowed in court

Prosecutor says evidence shows earlier child abuse

By Kevin Grasha

Lansing State Journal

Published July 8, 2006

Seven-year-old Ricky Holland's school and psychological records will be allowed as evidence in the case against his adoptive parents, Tim and Lisa Holland, a judge ruled Friday.

Those records include evidence that the Hollands - who are charged with open murder and first-degree child abuse - abused Ricky at least three years before he was killed, Assistant Prosecutor Mike Ferency said.

Ingham County Circuit Judge Paula Manderfield also ruled during a hearing Friday to allow testimony from a neighbor that Ricky felt unwanted by his parents.

Richard Cole Jr. testified at the Hollands' preliminary hearing earlier this year that Ricky overheard his parents "saying they wished they didn't have him."

Tim and Lisa Holland, of Williamston, are scheduled to be tried Sept. 11 before different juries on charges they killed Ricky.

Also Friday, testimony began regarding whether Lisa Holland's statements to police in a Jan. 26 jailhouse interview will be admissible during the trial.

Judge says he'll keep Angel House shelter full

Garcia committed to helping facility stay in business

By Tricia Bobeda

Lansing State Journal

Published July 9, 2006

Judge Richard Garcia sent an infant to Angel House, the area's only emergency shelter for abused and neglected children, on Friday.

And the Ingham County probate judge said he'll keep sending children there as long as the new shelter has empty beds.

"If DHS isn't going to use (Angel House), I'm going to," Garcia said.

"I guarantee you that place will be full."

Garcia said he was shocked to learn from a State Journal story this week that few of the children he puts in the care of the Department of Human Services are going to the nonprofit shelter.

With just two to four of its 15 beds filled each day, Angel House is struggling financially.

Judges can place a child directly into Angel House for shelter care, assessment and placement planning.

And that's what Garcia will do when appropriate, even though it costs the county \$170 a day, twice as much as if DHS placed the child there.

Philosophy shift

When DHS places a child, the state splits the cost with the county. If the judge does direct placement, the county must cover the entire cost.

But DHS wasn't placing many children at Angel House, anyway.

DHS is shifting philosophies and tries to place children in relative or foster care immediately instead of using emergency shelters.

Jim Paparella, executive director of the Child and Family Services Capital Area division, said Garcia called him after reading about Angel House's empty beds.

"We're tremendously hopeful and optimistic," said Paparella, whose agency runs the \$1.7 million facility.

County is committed

Despite the cost, Ingham County is committed to Angel House's success, county Commissioner Steve Dougan.

Dougan said the board has a role to play in keeping Angel House open and able to serve the community.

He supports Garcia's decision to directly place children there, but said it's too soon to tell how it will affect the county's budget.

Garcia has promised to use Angel House whenever appropriate. He has up to 15 children in his caseload right now who would fit that scenario, he said.

"Any child who is a victim of sexual abuse should spend their first night of state care in Angel House," he said.

Ingham County Commissioner Andy Schor said that its funding can only stretch so far.

"Our commitment is to getting kids the proper level of treatment but not break the bank," Schor said.

Family initiative

Emergency shelters are a last resort, said Susan Hull, director of the Ingham County DHS office.

This fundamental change in the state's child welfare system is part of the Family to Family initiative.

It is in place in 38 counties and will be statewide policy by 2007.

"Safety is No. 1 - that is our goal to make sure we always have children in safe environments," DHS Director Marianne Udow said in a June interview.

"But to the extent that we can, we want to keep children in their biological families if it is safe and if it is possible."

Garcia is worried that the push for relative or foster care instead of shelter care isn't always in the child's best interest.

He said DHS workers do their best and often make good decisions.

But wise choices on placement can't necessarily be made in the middle of the night, when a child is pulled from an abusive situation.

"I see too many kids who get dropped into a relative placement or inappropriate foster placement and get further injured," Garcia said.

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Mom of 3 is accused of sex with boy, 15

July 8, 2006

BY L.L. BRASIER

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Jami Lee Knox, 41, of Farmington Hills is charged with third-degree criminal sexual conduct and using a computer in a crime.

A 41-year-old Farmington Hills woman was arraigned Friday on charges of sexually assaulting a 15-year-old friend of her son.

Jami Lee Knox was released on a \$50,000 personal bond Friday, following her arraignment in 47th District Court in Farmington Hills. She is to appear before District Judge James Brady on Wednesday, according to court records.

In addition to two counts of third-degree criminal sexual conduct -- having sex with a child between the ages of 13 and 15 -- she is charged with using a computer to commit a crime.

According to televised reports Friday, Knox had an ongoing relationship with the boy. His parents contacted Farmington Hills police after becoming suspicious about his e-mail and phone activity.

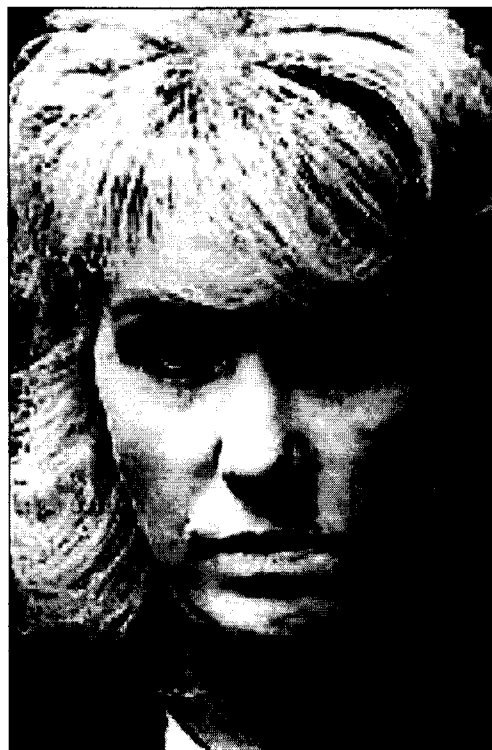
Knox is married and has three children.

Police say her son brought the boy home several weeks ago, and that she began taking the teen to sports outings and for ice cream. At one point, she drove him to a cemetery, where they had sex, police said. And, according to police, Knox sometimes posed as the boy's mother and called his school to get him released early.

"There seems to be a growing number of these middle-age women -- these desperate housewives -- who are luring these juveniles into sexual relationships," said Farmington Hills Police Chief William Dwyer.

"This boy is 15, he's scarred. His parents are upset, and this woman has three children and a husband who have been harmed by this."

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Jami Lee Knox, 41, of Farmington Hills is charged with third-degree criminal sexual conduct and using a computer in a crime.

Michigan drifting southward in improving child well-being

Article published Jul 9, 2006
Hometownlife.com

The press kit for this year's Kids Count report came with a wheel. You can turn to each state and it gives the state's rank and how it scores on the Kids Count key indicators for child well-being.

Michigan scores a disappointing 27th among the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

Kids Count is a project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation to track the status of children's welfare nationally and state-by-state. The project in Michigan is supported by the Baltimore-based Casey Foundation and the Detroit-based Skillman Foundation, the Blue Cross/Blue Shield Foundation of Michigan and the Michigan Association of United Ways. The Michigan Leagues of Human Services and Michigan's Children gathers the information.

The figures released this year were gathered in 2003.

Kids Count focuses on 10 areas it defines as critical for child well-being: percent of low-birthweight babies (live births weighing less than 5.5 pounds), infant mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 live births), child death rate (deaths per 100,000 children ages 1-14), teen death rates (deaths per 100,000 teen ages 15-19), teen birth rate (births per 1,000 female ages 15-19), percent of teens who are high school dropouts (ages 16-19), percent of teens not attending school and not working (ages 16-19), percent of children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment, percent of children in poverty and percent of children in single-parent families.

Michigan's worst ranking is 43rd in infant mortality at 8.5 deaths per 1,000 births, compared to a national average of 6.9. Among African-Americans the infant mortality rate swells to 17.4 deaths per 1,000 births. (The rate is 6.7 for white infants.)

Michigan's sluggish and shifting economy accounts for a 29 percent increase in child poverty. Perhaps the economy is also responsible for Michigan's biggest turnaround, a 30 percent change in the teen dropout rate, dropping from 10 percent in 2000 to 7 percent in 2003. And Michigan ranks a respectable 10th in teen death rate, dropping from 64 to 55 deaths per 100,000 youth between 2000 and 2003. The national average was 66. Auto accidents account for more than a third of all teen deaths.

The teen birth rate has also declined by 15 percent in the period covered.

Like all statistics, these can be read a variety of ways. The Casey Foundation and the local groups that participate in these surveys see positive signs for adolescents and disturbing signs for infants and younger children. They advocate for more governmental involvement in addressing these issues.

They make special note of the disparity between African-Americans and the white majority.

"This disparity in infant mortality rates is driven by differences in access to health care, good jobs, safe housing and transportation services," said Michele Corey, director of Community Advocacy at Michigan's Children in the release.

When going around the handy Kids Count wheel, Michigan seems to be going South in its concern for children. The low-tax, low-wages South and Southwest is often seen as a model by some legislators. But it's a poor model for anything but winter weather.

Follow the magic wheel to Mississippi which finishes 50th in overall ranking. Former President Clinton used to joke that he thanked God for Mississippi because it always finished behind Arkansas in these kind of measurements when he was governor. Louisiana is 49th, New Mexico 48th, South Carolina 47th, Tennessee 46th, Arkansas 45th, Georgia 44th, Alabama 43rd, Kentucky 42nd, North Carolina 41st.

At the top is New Hampshire followed by Vermont, Connecticut, Minnesota, Iowa, Utah, New Jersey, Nebraska, North Dakota and Massachusetts.

That top group is a mix of northern and western states with liberal and conservative voting patterns.

One key difference between the bottom and top is racial and ethnic makeup of the states and long patterns of neglect toward minorities.

Our state legislators certainly need to do what is reasonable to attract business to Michigan. But they also need to address the problems surveyed in the Casey study. Drifting further south will only make matters worse. Some companies may well come for those handsome tax cuts and lack of regulation. But others might just wonder why a state with all this potential neglects its most vulnerable residents.

Foster care system failed family, they work to fix it

By Aatif Ali Bokhari -- The Arab American News – DEARBORN

<http://www.arabamericannews.com/newsarticle.php?articleid=5760>

It sounds like something straight out of a nightmarish 80s TV special, but Ahmed and Rehab Amer personally know what it feels like to have their children taken away from them unjustly.

Enduring over twenty years of accusations of having killed one of her children, religious and cultural prejudice, corrupt social workers and the trauma that comes with it all, Rehab was finally cleared of any wrongdoing last year.

The further one goes into the story of what happened to the Amer family, the murkier the workings of the justice system seem. In a special interview with "The Arab American News," Rehab said what happened to her family stood as an indictment of the foster care system, a system that is in desperate need of reform. That's why she and her husband are working on a proposed bill along with State of Michigan representative Gino Polidori to ensure that what happened to them doesn't happen to others as well.

Rehab said that in November 1986, "I had three children, twins Samier and Suehier, and Mohammed Ali." She said she had just bathed Suehier and Mohammed Ali and had begun bathing Samier when the phone rang. Ahmed was asleep in the other room.

"The phone was ten feet away, and I ran to get it when I heard a loud thud. I found my son lying unconscious in the bathtub and screamed for my husband to call an ambulance," said Rehab.

A Death That Changed Lives

Unbeknownst to Rehab, Samier was suffering from brittle-bone disease, a genetic disorder characterized by bones that break easily, often from little or no apparent cause. There is no cure for the disease. But Rehab and Ahmed were not told this when their son was admitted for the injury and would only come to find out much later.

Although Samier had no visible injuries, he went into a coma. According to Rehab, the hospital took him off breathing machines the next day, despite his parents' pleas that they wait, because he was brain dead. Leaving the other children with her mother, they held Samier's funeral the next day, as per Islamic guidelines. But the parents were in for another shock when they came home.

The police had come to Rehab's mother's home and taken their kids away. Confusing her nieces and nephews with her children, Rehab said, "They didn't even know which kids to grab, they said that all Arabs look alike. But my children had hidden under the couch and the police grabbed them."

"My kids were still in their pajamas at 8:30 in the morning, they didn't speak any English, they didn't know how to even ask for food or water."

The court then said that they could visit the kids 2 weeks later. Apparently a doctor had classified the death as a homicide although Ahmed and Rehab hadn't been told "anything."

"They didn't want to hear anything about our side of the story. They didn't want to place the children with relatives or anyone in our ethnic or religious community either," said Rehab.

The children were put in a foster home where they were abused night and day for the next two weeks. "When we met them 2 weeks later, they had bruises all over their faces, they were traumatized. They were taken into a home where they were abused over and over and we have documentation of that.

"When I tried to speak to the kids in Arabic, the social worker didn't let me. My kids didn't know how to speak English, and I needed to explain what had happened to them." But the mother was told, "that if I spoke to them in Arabic, she would terminate our visits.

"Until Feb 6, the courts kept adjourning the cases. Then the police came and arrested me, charging me with second degree murder. I was released on \$1,000 bond," said Rehab.

Before the Amers' case went to trial there was a preliminary hearing before Judge Joseph Portell. At that time, a medical examiner testified that Samier's death was homicide. That's when the Amers' attorney pointed out that the autopsy had first listed the death as resulting from an unknown cause, and then was amended the day she was arrested. When asked why it was changed, Rehab said that the examiner just said, "That's my finding, someone from the prosecuting office told me that the baby had been killed."

However, the judge said that would be taken out of the record and there was enough evidence for a jury trial. At the jury trial, the same examiner who had testified earlier came again. Rehab said, "The examiner started giving theories that the baby could not have died unless it was dropped by a three story building or hit by a truck."

The Amers' attorney asked what condition a baby would be in who had suffered such trauma. The examiner said he or she would be covered in bruises and cuts. The attorney pointed out there were no cuts or external signs of trauma on Samier and that even the internal organs showed no signs of damage. "So how did you classify it as homicide?" demanded the attorney.

The examiner could not explain that detail and it only took ten minutes for Rehab to be found not guilty. But the prosecuting attorney tossed his papers up in the air and said to the Amers' attorney, "Over my dead body, you will never get your children back, have them placed with relatives or placed in any Muslim home."

Unfortunately this was only the beginning of what would be a long series of legal battles to clear the Amer family name.

Treated Innocent and Guilty

"I was accused of killing my own son even though I was acquitted by jury in 1986. I still lost my kids because I didn't admit that I killed my son and my husband lost his parental rights because he supported me," recalled Rehab.

"After the acquittal, the case was taken to a probate court, a court that dealt with children even though I was supposed to get my kids back. On top of all this, I had another child on the way.

"The probate court has a different standard of evidence that can convict a person just because they are suspicious. The same doctor testified as before and the court said that they believed him.

"When I testified in the probate court and I said what happened, the social workers said that they wanted time to grieve, but what they really wanted to know was where my next baby was going to be born and who was going to take care of her.

The children were taken away from Ahmed and Rehab, this time for good. The day after Rehab's next baby, Zinebe, was born, the state came and took her away too.

"This was legalized kidnapping," said Rehab, her voice breaking. "Our case set a bad precedent, there was corruption, there was prejudice. They did things that were against the law and they got away with it."

Not only that but even when the law was carried out, it prevented the Amers from clearing their name. Oakwood Hospital refused to give the Amers Samier's medical records, saying that there was a hold placed on them by the state. "Right from birth he had brittle bone disease but Oakwood hospital never told us even though they had records of that problem. We couldn't get the records for 10 years," said Rehab.

"From the very beginning, Samier had screamed whenever he was touched. I didn't accept the diagnosis that nothing was wrong as we were told by hospital health carers. When I insisted on an examination, the baby was found to have multiple fractures at just 3 months of age," added Rehab. Unbelievably, no explanation had been given to the parents then.

Zinebe was taken by an adoption agency. Her foster mother testified in 1989 on behalf of the Amers saying that she was told by social workers to say that Zinebe had nightmares about her biological parents. This even though she had been taken a day after birth!

"The foster mother said she would not do go along with what the social workers were saying. They said if she wouldn't say what she was told, they would remove Zinebe from her home as quickly as she had been given," recalled Rehab.

The foster mother testified as she promised. Zinebe was promptly taken away and eventually placed with her brother and sister. "Zinebe was taken kicking and screaming, to punish [the foster mother], the same way they punished us," said Rehab. "We didn't get to see our children for another 13 years. Although we kept trying to appeal, it seemed no one even wanted to hear our case.

"In late 1994 we got skull records from 1984. I had watched a talk show that showed a family with a similar case to us. I contacted them and got in touch with a group that was helping them. A doctor from that organization contacted Oakwood Hospital and told them that he was from the Balboa Research Institute for Abuse, and he was requesting Samier's records. The hospital agreed "thinking he was a social worker," said Rehab.

The individual then forwarded the records to the Amers. There was only one missing skull x-ray but the records proved that Samier had had a brittle-bone disease. Armed with the records, the Amers redoubled their efforts to clear their name and re-unite the family.

Even with clear cut evidence of Rehab's innocence, the Amer couple faced opposition from the state. According to Rehab, William Ladd, "an attorney appointed by the state to protect the children and make sure that their rights were not violated, said in court 'it isn't in [the children's] best interest to know that their brother wasn't killed' because they had gone through extensive therapy ... and that they would 'lose faith in the system and it would ruin them'. The judge was baffled and asked 'are you telling me it's better that they not know their mother didn't kill their brother?'"

In January of 2005 the state found Rehab not guilty of any wrongdoing and decreed that her son Samier's death certificate should list his passing not as a homicide, but as an "accidental" death.

A Family Forever Destroyed

The Detroit News reported, "Mohammed Ali, now Adam Lee, lives in Minnesota, said his adoptive mother, Essie Stamper of Clarkston. Stamper would not reveal where Sueheir, now Suzanne Brook, lives. Zinabe, now Rochelle, lives with Stamper in Clarkston, and is graduating from high school this year. The Amers have visited their children, sometimes in the company of their adoptive parents, several times in the past few years."

But the damage has been done. And the pain isn't only in the past, it seems to positively simmer between the Stampers and Amers. Stamper was quoted by the Detroit News as having said, "it's been very hard for her losing all four of her children, really. And that's understandable, of course. If it had happened to me, I don't know that I could have made it." But the Amers say that their kids were brainwashed into not wanting to even see them and "too scared to make contact." Certainly an email forwarded by Rehab to "The Arab American News," that she said came from Stampers, showed the foster family was less than sympathetic.

The email said in part, "Hello Amers! I don't know where you people are coming from. We took you into our home for as long as you would allow [sic] and now all you do is tear us all apart. You know the children are adults now and they make their own decisions.

"You would think after almost 20 years you could go on with your life and accept that the children were adopted to a loving family and had a very good life. They visit you when they can and that isn't enough."

Information about the Amers' case, and the proposed bill to make sure that families who are split up by the state are treated properly, can be found at www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/642530911?tl=1152141331

John Parks — in between foster care and hopes of studying nursing

John Parks is 20 years old. He's finishing up an internship. He's waiting to hear whether he has been accepted into Eastern Michigan University. And he is homeless.

The State of Michigan, which had been his parent since he was 17, terminated his case two weeks ago on June 20, his 20th birthday.

"Happy Birthday," he said Wednesday in deadpan disgust. He is among nearly 500 youth expected to age out of Michigan's foster care system this year, most at age 18. Most leave unprepared for life, for school, for jobs, or, in some cases, to live on their own. John is among those who walked out of court without a permanent address.

More than 49% of the youth who aged out in 2002 and 2003 in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb Counties were homeless at some point during their first three years on their own, according to a survey released last month by Wayne State University's Research Group on Homelessness and Poverty. The study found that 25.4% were homeless immediately after aging out, while 36% had to return to the homes they were originally removed from; and 16.7% lived on the streets in cars or in abandoned buildings.

After spending seven months examining the challenges faced by youth aging out of foster care, I recently proposed, and the Free Press has endorsed, the creation of a small transitions campus or transitions center for them in Wayne County, with residential accommodations, classes in financial literacy and work and social skills, a health clinic and a clearinghouse for the information, including job and scholarship availabilities.

The idea that funding might be available for such as a campus has led several service agencies to

throw their hats into the ring to expand their missions. Those agencies are not optimum for a variety of reasons, but the main ones are these: These youths' greatest needs are stability and a home, even a temporary one, so they can be better prepared to live on their own; they are innocent and vulnerable victims of abuse or neglect who



ROCHELLE RILEY

AGING OUT

July 7

"I plan to go to nursing school full-time, but I need money now. I don't want to get in school and waste 3½ years."

JOHN PARKS, one of nearly 500 youths expected to age out of Michigan's foster care system this year

might not fare as well in a juvenile justice facility; and 57 percent of all of Michigan's foster care cases are in Wayne and its five surrounding counties (Oakland, Macomb, Livingston, Genesee and Washtenaw), so having a residential center in Wayne County — as opposed to Lansing, Grand Rapids or Jackson — would be more practical and more effective for more youth. If it works, perhaps a second one could be built up north. And then there's this: former foster youths across the state are taking their own destiny into their hands and have joined youth boards to fight their own advocacy battles. Proximity gives them strength.

The young people's needs and hopes fuel my quest for a campus, a place where they can learn and grow with other youths to make all of their lives better.

Such a residential campus could have helped John. His story began at Hutzel Hospital in 1986. John went home with his mother and lived with her until she died when John was just 14. His mother's roommate, who also lived with her son, became John's guardian. John attended Davis Aerospace High

School. But at 17, he called Child Protective Services himself to report alleged abuse by the man in the house.

John moved into a shelter. He graduated from high school but wasn't eligible for education funds because of his grades, so his next move was to a state-sanctioned residence. He survived on \$116 a month, then began working odd jobs and living with friends.

He tried community college, getting up early to attend classes at Macomb Community College.

"I caught the bus every day, three buses," he said. "The trip took three hours. I had an 8 o'clock class, so I had to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning."

John developed an interest in social work, then nursing. He got a \$9-an-hour internship to work at a homeless shelter, then got a second internship with SEMCOSH, the Southeastern Michigan Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health. But he was about to lose his foster home, and he had no family to help.

"I had some finances saved for an apartment, but I didn't have enough," he said.

On July 19, his temporary situation will end, and he's out of options.

"I don't have a permanent address," he said. "I only need somewhere to stay until school starts, because hopefully when school starts, I'll be going to Eastern Michigan, and I'll have room and board."

Most kids look at college as a place to decide careers or go to parties. John just wants a place to sleep.

It's hard to search for a job, work on your resume or even plan your life when you don't have a home.

"I plan to go to nursing school full-time," he said, "but I need money now. I don't want to get in school and waste 3½ years. I want to get used to poop and smelling vomit. Tomorrow, I'm going to find my mentor and see if I can do some work for him. He co-owns a PR firm. At least that'll keep me out of trouble."

"I wish I had more time to prepare," he said. "It's confusing. It's kind of like taking it day by day. ... I'm running out of options."

Council to hear proposed changes to home day care

Detroit Free Press

July 9, 2006

A public hearing on proposed ordinances governing large, home-based day care operations in Troy is scheduled for Monday night before the City Council.

For two years, the city has been grappling with the issue of whether to regulate home day care facilities that care for seven to 12 children more strictly than the state requires. A ban was imposed, then lifted, but the facilities have been operating in limbo for months.

Among the language causing some consternation among providers is a provision that would require them to register with the city annually and to submit to regular fire and building department inspections.

The City Council meets at 7:30 p.m. at City Hall, 500 W. Big Beaver Road.

Literacy video being sent to childcare providers

July 7, 2006 – MSU Today

It's never too early to read to a child. And now Michigan policymakers and MSU literacy experts are teaming up to promote reading to our youngest citizens in childcare settings.

A project led by Nell Duke, associate director of MSU's Literacy Achievement Research Center, has produced a DVD and 20-page booklet designed to help educate childcare center staff to improve children's learning experiences from birth through 5 years old.

The video and booklet, presented to Marianne Udow, director of the Michigan Department of Human Services, during a June 19 press conference, will be distributed to 20,000 licensed childcare providers across Michigan.

The effort is a result of a Michigan policy that requires all licensed childcare centers to include developmentally appropriate literacy activities for a minimum of 30 minutes per day. Typically, safety and staffing rather than curriculum have been the focus of state requirements.

Duke, an associate professor in MSU's College of Education, narrates the video which features video clips and photographs from childcare settings throughout Michigan, along with short commentaries by early childhood literacy experts, childcare providers and Gov. Jennifer Granholm.

"One of the challenges was to help childcare providers understand ways to foster emergent literacy development – for 30 minutes and beyond," Duke said. "How do you introduce books to infants, toddlers and preschoolers? How do you make print a part of everything from mealtimes to pretend play?"

The Department of Human Services will distribute the video and booklet through its Child Day Care Licensing Division. "As our knowledge and understanding of brain development continues to grow, the critical connection to the quality of young children's emotional relationships becomes even more apparent," said Udow.

"Our challenge is to act on this knowledge to ensure that every child born in Michigan reaches kindergarten with the intellectual and emotional foundation necessary to help him or her succeed in school," she said.

Individuals from several other states have also expressed interest in using the video, which will be made available for sale at cost through the literacy center's Web site, www.msularc.org. Duke was joined by four collaborating authors: Annie Moses, Alison Billman, Shenglan Zhang and Susan Bennett-Armistead, all of MSU.

Project development funding sources include the MSU Families and Communities Together Coalition, the literacy center, the MSU School of Social Work, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Child Day Care Licensing Division.

"Outreach enriches and sustains the intellectual vitality of scholarship throughout the campus and beyond," said Hiram Fitzgerald, associate provost for University Outreach and Engagement.

“This project touches all three aspects of engaged scholarship through teaching, research and service and demonstrates the value of community collaboration. Nell Duke provides an outstanding example of faculty outreach and engagement performance.”

For more information about MSU’s Literacy Achievement Research Center, visit the Web at www.msularc.org

Let's make a deal

Grand Rapids Press editorial

Saturday, July 08, 2006

The long and arduous saga of finding a new site for **Kent County's state-run social services headquarters** appears to be headed toward a satisfactory conclusion -- pending a lease deal with the state. All parties involved with a plan that would replace the Department of Human Services' cramped and obsolete building in Grand Rapids should make every effort to see it through to fruition. Starting at square one -- again -- ought not be an option.

The project has been twisting in the wind for almost 20 years. The starts, stops and detours have been enough to test the patience of Job. The latest plan calls for Kent County to build a 127,500-square-foot facility at Sheldon Complex, just blocks away from the current site on Franklin Street at Madison Avenue. Kent County would build on land purchased from the city and lease most of the building to the state. The structure would house all the area's DHS operations, including those now located at a satellite office in Cascade Township. The county's Health Department clinic that serves low-income residents, and the city-county-run employment and training service would also occupy the building.

Grand Rapids has approved the land option, but lease negotiations with the state are still being worked out. The county, which would issue 20-year bonds to build the new headquarters, wants a lease that insures the state occupies its share of the building for at least 20 years. That's certainly rea-

sonable. State services would take up 80 percent of the building, while county and city services would fill the other 20 percent of space. A lease deal that's equitable to all sides certainly seem possible and ought not derail this plan.

Finding a new home for the state-run welfare agency has not been a high state priority for years, despite pressure from Kent County officials. But discussions about a new facility took a serious turn last November, when then-County Board of Commissioners Chairman David Morren, R-Gaines Township, threatened the state with eviction from the county-owned Franklin Street site by June 30.

That deadline has passed, but good progress is being made on plans for a new site. State Rep. Jerry O. Kooiman, R-Grand Rapids, has been the point man in Lansing working with state officials on the deal. Mr. Kooiman is optimistic that an agreement will be struck and new facility built, this time.

Even so, Kent County officials rightly are taking a two-pronged approach: trying to work out a lease deal with the state, while taking the steps necessary to put eviction measures in motion should state officials fall into another round of footdragging. The county should be prepared to go, either way.

Lawmakers expected to start approving state budget

7/9/2006, 8:37 a.m. ET

The Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — State lawmakers this week are expected to continue working on the state budget that starts Oct. 1.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm and Republican legislative leaders reached a tentative budget deal in late June, but now it's up to joint House-Senate conference committees to hash out the details. Each conference committee has been given a spending target and will meet Wednesday to start coming up with funding reductions to state departments.

The budget agreement provides \$210 more per pupil for K-12 public schools, raising the minimum foundation allowance to \$7,085. That's \$10 more than proposed by the Democratic governor and less than initially passed in the Legislature.

The minimum may be higher for districts getting the lowest per-pupil amounts, since the deal tries to close funding inequities by boosting the per-pupil minimums for those districts.

Universities and community colleges will see funding increases averaging 3 percent, with some getting 2.5 percent and others getting as much as 6 percent.

The budget also sets aside money for a Michigan State Police trooper school. There are about 250 fewer troopers now than in 2000, and lawmakers have said training more should be a priority because of increasing demands on law enforcement.

Homeowner assistance program could face cuts

July 9, 2006

BY KATHLEEN GRAY

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Oakland County community and home improvement inspector Pete Essenmacher, 39, of Commerce Township checks out a home in Hazel Park on Thursday to determine whether it has lead-based paint. The program he works for might face cuts if Congress reduces its federal funding.

The federal government and Oakland County have been good to Yvonne Lampela and her family.

Five years ago, she got a new roof, water well and windows at her 1,200-square-foot ranch house that was built in 1970 in Clarkston. Last year, she added a new hot water heater, furnace, kitchen cupboards and countertops and doors throughout the home.

The \$25,000 worth of work was paid for through no-interest loans provided by federal community development block grants administered by Oakland County. Lampela paid a portion of the loans back on the first batch of work done, but the cost of the second job will be paid back when she sells the house or both her and her husband, Robert, die.

The program for low- and moderate-income homeowners that helped pay for the work on Lampela's home and hundreds of others in Oakland County is in jeopardy. The federal government has proposed cutting \$1 billion from the popular program, and if the federal cash is cut, so is the \$355,000 match from Oakland County.

Right now, the county match is in the proposed \$490-million general fund budget for the 2006-07 fiscal year, which begins Oct. 1. But the money isn't guaranteed because of the uncertainty of the federal funding, said Laurie VanPelt, director of the county's Management and Budget Department.

Also at stake are the 22 people, like Pete Essenmacher, who work in the county's community and home improvement division. The employees work on people's homes, counsel homeowners on how to avoid foreclosure and provide grants for homeless shelters. The division also acts as the administrative agency, passing federal dollars through to 50 cities in Oakland County.

This week, Essenmacher was checking a house in Hazel Park to determine whether it contained lead-based paint.

The program has been on Congress' perennial hit list, sustaining a 10% cut last year.

"We took a substantial hit last year," said Karry Reith, director of the county's home improvement division. "But we've been fortunate that we've been able to downsize the staff through attrition. But if we get a flat line or cut for next year, we're going to have to lose more staff."

For residents like Lampela, the program has been a lifesaver. Her husband, Robert, a 14-year survivor of a lung transplant, is unable to work and caring for him and a severely impaired daughter who died recently has been a full-time job for Lampela. The family survives on \$1,700 a month in disability payments and has little extra for home improvements.

"It was pretty bad in here. My cupboards were falling off the walls. The floor was cracked in the kitchen and we still had the original furnace," she said. "When they replaced my furnace, my gas bills got lower almost right away. Last year at this time, I was still paying my gas bill in July. But this year, I was caught up two months ago."

The U.S. House passed a budget that includes \$4.2 billion for the program, which is higher than the Bush administration proposed.

But the Senate isn't expected to take up the bill until next month and a final version of the bill may not be complete until October, just as the new budget year begins for Oakland County. Contact **KATHLEEN GRAY** at 313-223-4407 or gray@freepress.com.

Police say meth crackdown yields results

Saturday, July 08, 2006

By Rosemary Parke

rrparker@kalamazoogazette.com

The \$200,000 multi-agency effort to stamp out methamphetamine has paid off, the U.S. Attorney's office announced Friday.

Kalamazoo County's meth-lab seizures dropped from 115 in 2005 to only 30 so far this year. Barry County has had a single meth-lab seizure so far this year -- down from 11 last year. What about Van Buren County, once ranked at the top of the state for clandestine methamphetamine labs?

So far, not one.

But it's not yet time for sighs of relief, said Margaret Chiara, U.S. Attorney from the Western District office.

"I have enormous concern for the rest of Michigan," Chiara said, acknowledging that manufacture and use of the illicit stimulant tend to move from one area to another in response to such intense enforcement pressure.

For seven months federal agents have worked side-by-side with state and local meth teams, an effort that has brought the arrests of 31 people, the seizure of drugs and weapons and the shut down of an additional five clandestine methamphetamine laboratories, which were handled by federal teams.

"We came in to take them out," DEA special agent Robert Corso said.

Representatives from the cooperating agencies gathered Friday to announce the results of their collaborative effort to fight the manufacture and use of methamphetamine in southwestern Michigan.

The special operation is over and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency is reassigning its mobile teams.

Still, it's not police pressure alone that has made the difference, said Kalamazoo Public Safety Chief Dan Weston.

Clamping down on availability of the ingredients needed to manufacture homemade methamphetamine has been a tremendous help, Weston said in an interview following the press conference.

Farmers have added dye to their tanks of fertilizer to discourage its theft by methamphetamine-makers who use it as a catalyst in their clandestine operations.

New state laws require stores to limit access to certain cold medicines that can be converted to methamphetamine. Alert retailers reporting unusual activity have led to several of arrests this year.

Chiara said stiffer penalties imposed by the courts have prevented the repeat offenses that plagued earlier enforcement work.

Barry County Prosecutor Julie Nakfoor Pratt said that education outreach to teachers, day-care centers and residents has paid off, too, with increased reports of suspicious sights and smells that could be methamphetamine-related.

Area's meth crackdown pays off

Some fear drug labs will just relocate to avoid police efforts

Associated Press

Published July 10, 2006

From the Lansing State Journal

KALAMAZOO - An effort to fight the production and use of methamphetamine in southwest Michigan has paid off, the U.S. attorney's office says, but officials are concerned that drug makers could relocate.

During the past seven months, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration has assisted Kalamazoo-area law enforcement in the crackdown.

Thirty-five people were arrested, seven methamphetamine labs were seized, and marijuana, cocaine, heroin and meth were confiscated. In one seizure last week, police confiscated more than 50 firearms.

Meth - a highly addictive drug - can be made with common household products, including cold medicine that has pseudoephedrine. It's a growing problem in many parts of Michigan and in several other states.

Kalamazoo County's meth lab seizures dropped to 30 this year from 115 in 2005. Barry County had one seizure, down from 11 last year, the Kalamazoo Gazette reported. Calhoun County also had fewer meth cases, prosecutor John Hallacy told the Battle Creek Enquirer.

But Margaret Chiara, U.S. attorney for the Western District of Michigan, said she is worried that the manufacture of the drug might move to other areas following the crackdown in the Kalamazoo area.

"I have enormous concern for the rest of Michigan," Chiara said.

The special operation involved the Michigan State Police as well as local prosecutors and law enforcement.

Police declined to provide specifics about those arrested and the locations of the labs.

Local law enforcement officials said they also have made an effort to increase education outreach to teachers, day-care centers and residents so others can recognize production in their communities.

Crackdown on meth underway in Michigan

<http://www.wndu.com/rss/>

Posted: 07/07/2006 03:08 pm

Michigan - A crackdown on meth is currently underway in the state of Michigan.

This week, Governor Granholm signed legislation designed to deal with the aftermath of making and using meth.

The package of bills requires the state to develop new procedures for cleaning up makeshift sites contaminated by meth production.

It also prohibits people from using websites to give instructions to make the illegal drug, as well as adds meth exposure to the definition of child abuse.

Meth is a highly addictive drug that can be made with common household products, including cold medicine.

New Anti-Meth Law for Michigan

Associated Press

<http://www.wilx.com/news/headlines/3289491.html>

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Meth is a highly addictive drug that can be made with common household products, including cold medicine. It's a growing problem in many parts of Michigan and in several other states.

Health group assists needy

Medicaid sign-up targets uninsured

July 9, 2006

BY KATIE MERX

FREE PRESS BUSINESS WRITER

The **Detroit Wayne County Health Authority** has signed an agreement with the state that could reduce the number of uninsured people in the area and bring more federal Medicaid dollars to the county.

Why should you care?

There are 150,000 Medicaid-eligible residents in Detroit and Wayne County who aren't enrolled. When those people show up at a doctor's office or hospital, they likely won't be able to afford medical treatment.

If they're uninsured, the hospital or doctor often eats the cost and must find another way to recoup it. The provider raises rates, loses money or stops serving the area.

If those patients have Medicaid, however, health providers get some payment for treating them and are more likely to continue serving the area.

In the seven weeks since the authority began a Medicaid enrollment pilot program, it has helped about 1,100 people apply, authority director Chris Allen said.

"We had 505 approvals and 588 cases pending," he said.

The Medicaid enrollment project is just part of what the authority is working on, Allen said. It hopes to be the organizational body that coordinates care for poor and uninsured people in the county so that people who need care can get it before their conditions become acute and require expensive hospitalization.

The other priorities for the authority are:

- Working with United Way to question callers to the 211 phone number about their insurance status and enroll those who are eligible for Medicaid but not enrolled. That has already resulted in five to seven new enrollees each day.
- Working with nurse practitioners to establish more primary care facilities with long hours in pharmacies and shopping centers throughout the county.
- Working with leaders from the area's free clinics to coordinate services, eliminate duplication and create a force for pursuing governmental policy changes.

Contact **KATIE MERX** at 313-222-8762 or kmerx@freepress.com.

Bonds pushed for health care

Oakland County has a unique plan to pay for its retirees

July 9, 2006

BY KATHLEEN GRAY

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Faced with the rising cost of medical care and looming federal accounting changes, Oakland County is looking at a unique way to pay for retirees' health care costs.

Oakland County Executive L. Brooks Patterson wants to issue \$500 million in bonds to cover those insurance bills over the next 30 years. He plans to make the proposal this month as part of his proposed 2006-07 budget.

It's a tactic that many cities, including Detroit, have used to fund pension obligations, but no one in Michigan has sold bonds yet for retiree health care.

"If Oakland County feels the need to float bonds to pay for retiree health care costs, I don't know what that says about other communities that aren't in as good a shape," Michael LaFaive, director of fiscal policy at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Midland, said last week.

Other governments have taken different routes as they searched for relief:

- Alaska offers scaled-back retiree health plans for newly hired state workers.
- Duluth, Minn., raised the amount of time an employee must work for the city before becoming eligible for retiree health benefits to 20 years from three.
- Macomb County has set money aside periodically for retiree health care and built up a fund of about \$65 million. But tough economic times have nixed those set-asides for the last three budget years.

The current rush to figure out how to pay for retirees' health care is due to new federal accounting rules, effective at the end of the year. The rules will require state, county and city governments to report the value of medical benefits promised to employees at retirement. In some cases, costs already are in the billions.

Michigan has \$7 billion in projected health care costs for tens of thousands of current and future retirees. The projected figure for the state's public schools is \$16.2 billion. Wayne County estimates its medical costs for current and future retirees could go as high as \$1.2 billion.

Most governments, including the state and Wayne County, pay the costs as the bills come due for current retirees.

What's next for the bond plan

• **The plan:** Included in the county's proposed \$490-million general fund budget is a proposal to issue \$500 million in bonds to pay for retiree health care costs for the next 30 years.

• **The bond type:** Municipalities can issue a certain type of bond to cover pensions or retiree health costs. But state Sen. Nancy Cassis, R-Nov, is working on a bill that, if made law, would allow for more financially attractive bonds for retiree health care trust funds. That's the bond Oakland County would issue.

• **The procedure:** A majority of the full board will have to approve the proposal and the budget; the board must vote before Oct. 1.

• **The meeting:** The budget will be presented to the Board of Commissioners at 7 p.m. July 19. The meeting is open to the public and will be held in the board auditorium, 1200 N. Telegraph, Pontiac.

In fiscal 2005, the state paid \$1.1 billion for health care for more than 200,000 retirees, including \$705 million for 151,000 former public school employees. Wayne County paid about \$50 million in health care benefits for roughly 5,500 retirees.

"Our policy has been to pay as you go, and that's pretty common," said Lisa Fath of the state's Office of Financial Management. "There hasn't been too much prefunded anywhere." Oakland County's proposal would change that.

The county, which has 4,520 employees and 1,914 retirees, has set aside money each year for current and future retirees, but only 35% of future costs were covered, leaving an unfunded liability of roughly \$500 million, budget director Laurie VanPelt said.

Proceeds from the sale of the bonds would fill that liability gap and be put in a trust fund to pay for future costs, earning an estimated \$145 million in interest over the 20-year life of the bonds. The new federal accounting rules don't require governments to fully fund their retiree health care obligations, just to include the costs in financial reports and put theoretical plans in place to pay them.

Oakland County decided to take the unusual step because the time was right, VanPelt said. The county already began offering a different retiree health care plan for people hired after Jan. 1, 2006. But health care costs for retirees were still \$9 million more than projected for the 2006-07 budget year, she said, so the county had a choice of cutting programs and services or coming up with a different plan.

"We figured that we're never going to be at this point again with interest rates so low," she said, noting that the 5.5% interest rate the county would pay on the bonds would be among the lowest interest rates ever offered.

Once the federal reporting requirements are fully implemented, financial analysts say they believe the public will balk at the astronomical costs for retirees, and rating agencies could downgrade bond ratings, leading to higher interest rates for state, county and local governments.

Frank Shafroth, a public policy professor at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., and an expert on retiree health care, said many local governments don't appreciate how serious a problem the escalating costs are for government's bottom line. Coming up with solutions will force elected officials to make some uncomfortable decisions.

"If you're an elected official, you don't want to anger unions by cutting benefits or taxpayers by cutting services," Shafroth said last week. "This is the big Kahuna on the horizon. The longer cities don't do anything, the worse it's going to get."

The City of Detroit did not provide retiree health care current costs or projections to the Free Press. But a study done last year for Detroit's Auditor General estimated that the city's obligations for current and future retirees would be \$7.2 billion. The J.L. Boyle consulting firm in Ann Arbor said in its report that the city's retiree health care costs increased by 88% from 1998 to 2004 and cost the city \$153 million in 2006.

"This is Detroit's fiscal storm," said LaFaive of the Mackinac Center.
*Contact **KATHLEEN GRAY** at 313-223-4407 or gray@freepress.com.*

States retool welfare under new TANF rules

By Christine Vestal, Stateline.org Staff Writer

Sunday, July 09, 2006

<http://www.stateline.org/live/ViewPage.action?siteNodeId=136&languageId=1&contentId=125536>

While most states are scrambling to meet stiff new federal standards for moving poor people from welfare to work, Georgia, Arkansas and New Hampshire already have revamped their Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs to comply with the new rules.

Three other states -- California, Michigan and Washington -- are hammering out final details on new laws designed to boost the number of welfare recipients who land and keep jobs.

The new federal rules, issued last month, carry out Congress' orders that states enroll at least 50 percent of poor parents in work-preparation programs. If the standards aren't met, states face hefty penalties starting Oct. 1.

The regulations also curtail states' ability to develop their own brands of welfare-to-work programs by strictly defining what types of activities qualify as work preparation. In addition, the new rules extend federal oversight to separate state-funded TANF programs.

The changes take the "block" out of the block grant concept, said Michael Bird of the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), explaining that the hallmark of Congress' 1996 welfare reform was the broad authority it gave states.

In announcing the rule changes, Bush administration officials pointed to Georgia's revamped welfare system as a model other states should follow.

Georgia achieved increased work-participation rates by making the work rules clear to welfare applicants from the beginning, monitoring their compliance on a daily basis and quickly cutting off cash assistance if they failed to attend their assigned work programs or counseling sessions, according to state officials.

Since launching its new plan in 2004, the percentage of Georgia's welfare recipients engaged in work-related programs has risen from 24 percent to 64 percent, in part because people who failed to meet the requirements were dropped from the rolls.

Between 2000 and 2005, Georgia's welfare rolls fell from roughly 30,000 recipients to fewer than 8,000, leading some advocates for the needy to question whether the state was simply pushing people off welfare to meet federal goals.

NCSL's Sheri Steisel says that despite the federal government's promotion of the Georgia plan, states are not likely to follow a "one-size-fits-all" model.

Arkansas' strategy is a case in point.

Instead of moving more people off of its rolls, Arkansas launched a program July 1 allowing parents to stay on welfare even after they land jobs. Statewide research shows that without

continued assistance, most welfare recipients lose their jobs and end up back on the rolls within a year.

By counting working parents who stay in the program, Arkansas expects to boost its work-participation rate from 28 percent to nearly 45 percent this year.

New Hampshire's new law combines stricter sanctions for those that fail to comply with state work rules and a program similar to Arkansas' that allows working parents to remain on welfare until they reach a certain income level.

New Hampshire Gov. John Lynch (D) signed the law last month under protest that it did not go far enough to help poor people become self-sufficient. To supplement the law, he issued an executive order committing additional funds for child care, transportation and education "to ensure that TANF clients can truly move from welfare to work permanently," he said.

NCSL's Jack Tweedie says states can take three basic approaches to meeting the new federal requirements:

Follow the Georgia model and push more people into job-related activities by imposing tougher sanctions on those who fail to comply with the rules.

Follow the Arkansas plan and keep working parents on the rolls to improve their future economic prospects and boost the total number of welfare recipients who are working or in job-preparation programs.

Follow models being developed in California and other states that provide non-TANF state programs for needy parents who are the least likely to find and keep jobs, including those with mental or physical handicaps, handicapped children, and drug or alcohol addictions. By removing these needy families from the TANF program, states can improve their overall work-participation rates.

Even using these strategies, some states will be hard-pressed to meet the new work-participation rates, Tweedie said. At least 15 states will have to more than double the percentage of welfare recipients engaged in work programs; 23 more will have to boost their rates by more than half.

Under the 1996 rules, states received a caseload reduction credit each year that welfare rolls were lower than 1995 levels. For example, if rolls were half of the 1995 level, the work participation rate was reduced by half. Because welfare rolls shrank dramatically during the economic boom of the late 1990s, the original 50 percent federal work-participation rate was reduced to 25 percent or lower in every state.

Starting Oct. 1, the base year for calculating caseload reduction credits will be shifted to 2005, giving states little to no credits, since welfare rolls have fallen very little since 2005.

Over the years several states, including Virginia and Massachusetts, boosted their work participation rates by placing the majority of difficult-to-employ parents in state-run TANF programs that were not regulated by the federal government. As of Oct. 1, those programs will come under federal purview, causing work participation rates to plummet in those states.

Other TANF changes, including strict definitions of which activities can be counted as work preparation, will hinder states' efforts to bring their programs into compliance.

For example, states no longer are allowed to include degree-oriented college courses as work preparation, and only six weeks of drug rehabilitation per year can be counted toward work rates. The new rules also disqualify many community-service jobs states had counted as work preparation.

Wisconsin, Wyoming and Ohio currently exceed the new requirements because they aggressively enforced work rules starting in 1996. Unlike other states, they did not use caseload reductions credits to ease their transition into the welfare-to-work program.

Prior to 1996, the federal welfare program did not require states to help people find jobs and move off of welfare. To give states time to craft their welfare-to-work programs, the federal government offered caseload reduction credits as a cushion against work-participation standards.

With most legislative sessions over or ending soon, many states are asking the U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources to withhold penalties until they have time to legislate needed changes early next year.

Send your comments on this story to: letters@stateline.org. Selected reader feedback will be posted in the Letters to the Editor section.

Contact Christine Vestal at cvestal@stateline.org

Reform welfare

Editor, The Saginaw News:

Michigan is one of the only states that allows people to stay on welfare forever. These people are trapped in this system and have no way to get out. Our state faces possible fines of hundreds of millions of dollars from the federal government if we do not change our welfare system. This is irresponsible.

Our state is in a budget crisis, and the last thing we need is to be dishing out excessive funds to the federal government. We need a governor who is going to stand up and take action against this senselessness. It is time for the governor to actually lead for once in her career.

Kevin J. Schultz
DeVos for Governor Campaign
Saginaw County chairman
Saginaw Township

Highfields to reopen program for youths today

Returning workers get training, new procedures

Lansing State Journal

Published July 10, 2006

Highfields Inc. today plans to reopen its Youth Opportunity Program and will begin accepting children as they are referred by agencies across the state.

The program was closed in February after the reported mistreatment of three youths in the program. After those reports, state officials and Ingham County judges removed 33 boys.

Interim President Larry Miesner said the majority of staff laid off in February have returned and received training.

Advertisement

"We have been preparing new policies and procedures, and have provided training to returning employees so that we can offer the most effective treatment possible to them and to their families," Miesner said in a news release.

The Youth Opportunity Program is one of 17 programs Highfields operates. It will open with two residential houses, which can accommodate 24 young men.

The nonprofit organization works with about 1,000 families a year in a variety of in-home and school-based programs to improve parenting, and prevent domestic violence and abuse.

"We are confident in the training and new processes implemented during the last three months and look forward to the program resuming," Keith Groty, chair of Highfields' board of directors, said in a release.

Firefighters again win annual Battle for Blood

Local firefighters emerged victorious again in the Battle for Blood. The sixth annual event pits mid-Michigan firefighters against police officers to see who can give the most blood over two weeks.

Firefighters and their allies kept their title by giving 477 units; people donating on behalf of police, or officers themselves, gave 439.

"We try to get people's attention, but we also add some comic relief," Lansing Firefighter Ignacio Centeno said.

That includes a banner outside the American Red Cross building on Grand River Avenue saying police want people to donate for the firefighters' team.

Although the competition ended Saturday, the need for blood donations remains strong, said Ann Kammerer spokeswoman for the American Red Cross-Great Lakes Region in Lansing. The need is higher in the summer, when more traffic crashes occur and regular blood donors are on vacation. For information on how to donate, visit www.givelife.org.

Old barn successfully moved 1 mile in Mason

MASON - After 22 days of stopping, waiting and then starting again on a milelong journey, a 100-year-old barn made its way to its new location last week.

Despite some delays, the Mason barn was transplanted from Ash Street to its new location on Dansville Road.

The 100-ton structure was moved to make room for a senior condominium development.

"It's a relief it made it with minor damage," said Greg Shaw, 54, who paid \$1 for the barn that has been his home and business, Shaw's Appliance Service.

The only damage from the move was cracked drywall, he said. Foundation work will begin next week and is expected to be completed by the end of July.

Staff writer Jen Marckini contributed to this report. Is there a local story you'd like to see revisited? Please call (517) 267-1300 or e-mail metro@lsj.com

Last chance: Get-tough approach challenges Michigan kids

By Susan Vela

Lansing State Journal

Published July 10, 2006

AUGUSTA - Naomi Cinko traveled 10 hours to arrive Sunday at the gates of Fort Custer Training Center and Day One of the Michigan Youth Challenge Academy.

In the next two weeks, the petite 17-year-old will journey even further while discovering if she's physically, mentally, emotionally and academically prepared for the first leg of the academy's paramilitary program.

The Menominee teen must survive. The academy run by the Michigan National Guard could be her best chance at attaining a high school diploma or its equivalent.

"I want to be here so I can finish school," Naomi said, standing shoulders back with some military panache.

She had just completed a pivoting exercise, with instructors - or cadre members - watching her every move.

Exactly 146 teens reported for the academy's Pre-Challenge, which is modeled after the military's basic training. Teens must graduate from these initial two weeks before actual book learning begins.

Lots of 'Hurry up!'

On Sunday, cadre members rarely stopped shouting.

"Let's go!"

"Hurry up!"

And when the 16- through 18-year-olds gave a "Yes, sir" or "No, sir," the cadre was there to shout "Say it again!" and "Louder! Louder! Louder!"

"It's pretty insane (with) a lot of screaming and a lot of directions," said Anthony Quinn, 16, of Battle Creek, describing his introduction to Pre-Challenge.

Tall and thin, he's been running and doing sit-ups and push-ups in preparation.

Simon Fogg, 16, of Bellevue, has been working out, too.

Still, "it's going to be hard," Simon said of the academy.

He struggled to find his bearings on the first day of his new school. At about 3 p.m., there were so many unknowns.

"You don't know how it's going to be," said Simon, who was on the verge of dropping out at Bellevue High School. "You wonder who you're bunking with, if the water is good, (if) the food ..."

Simon's hoping the academy gets him into the Marine Corps.

Avoiding a rap sheet

Ryan Gilliland, 16, of Eaton Rapids, is hoping to escape a rap sheet.

He was suspended from Eaton Rapids High School for selling marijuana on school grounds this past school year. Ryan learned Friday that an Eaton County court will drop the charge if he graduates from the academy.

Ryan said the academy could provide the last opportunity to straighten out his life.

A better future, he said, is worth waking up at 5:30 a.m. every day and toiling under his instructors' incessant commands.

Richard Gilliland, a former Navy man, thinks military training, will help his son.

"It just instills a confidence in you," the father said.

Many of the academy's students come from abusive, fractious homes or from foster care.

Seventeen-year-old Jere Buford, who lives near Detroit, was thankful to say goodbye to his father Sunday morning.

They've been arguing since Jere's mother died of cancer in February.

The constant combat may have inadvertently helped Jere, a 115-pound teen who didn't crumble under the cadre's bellows.

"I'm doing pretty good," the teen said. "My dad was a Marine, so I'm kind of used to it."

Graduating 1,100 kids

Since its 1999 start, the academy has graduated more than 1,100 teens. Officials say that 90 percent become productive citizens by joining the work force, signing up for the military or attending college.

Yet, based on prior years, only 60 percent of those who show up for the Pre-ChalleNGe are likely to graduate from the full academy.

The physical training, officials promise, will make the candidates strong in many ways and give them the structure, routine and discipline they unwittingly desire.

"Really, our mission once they come for Pre-ChalleNGe is to set the standard," said Lyle Forcia, the academy's cadre supervisor. "That's really what we try to do - take them from a civilian and teach them how to survive."

For now, there are only 13 more days to go and the future of these 146 teens is on the line.

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Migrant work camps offer few amenities

Sunday, July 09, 2006

By Chris Killian

Special to the Kalamazoo Gazette

Along a remote stretch of country road in rural Van Buren County, eight small dwellings can be seen in a wooded area, their rusting chimneys poking out of each tar-paper roof.

The first indication that anyone actually lives in this migrant work camp a few miles east of South Haven -- one of hundreds spread across southwestern Michigan -- is the work jeans hanging from clotheslines connecting the cabins.

On closer inspection on this June day, the scenes of everyday life come into focus: plastic toys and bicycles are scattered about the lawn, children are laughing and playing, men are sitting around a table, enjoying an after-work beer as dusk settles in.

For five months, when they're not picking fruit, they're living in cabins the size of a large living room.

"We are used to this," said Rogerio Belmanes, a migrant worker who has lived at this camp for the past 10 summers. "We have to be, because this is our life."

There is no indoor plumbing, no air conditioning and few comforts that would typically make an American house a home.

On this particular day, a health inspector from the Michigan Department of Agriculture has visited the camp to determine whether it was habitable.

A sign posted on the bathhouse reads, "Licensed Agricultural Labor Camp."

Belmanes, 44, motions to the sign, asking one of his fellow workers, "How can it be all right when there is no running water here?"

The cabins don't have running water, but there is a hose attached to the bathhouse where residents get their water. Plumbing or not, this camp is their home, and the migrant workers do their best to make it so.

Inside the cabin of Pascual and Maria, both of whom requested that their last names not be published, scenes from the evening news flash across a small television near the bed where the married couple's three young children sleep.

Across the room is the kitchen area, where a few pots soak in a small porcelain sink. Boxes and cans of generic-brand food are neatly stacked in the corner. The dishes are washed and drying on an old dish rack near an aging gas stove.

In spite of the family's lack of material possessions, there is pride in this place. It's clean and orderly, the scraps of linoleum and carpet remnants that cover the concrete floor are swept. The

refrigerator is packed with leftovers, mostly beans and rice, along with a few packages of hot dogs.

Outside, the camp's inhabitants are gathered at a table. The men sip their beer; the children take gulps of Mexican soda.

Kristian jumps into Pascual's lap. His father holds him as Kristian's long, wavy black hair settles on Pascual's strong forearms.

The workers talk to each other about their day culling apples in orchards near the camp. They talk about trying to make ends meet on \$5.15 an hour, and wonder what the future holds for them as they notice more and more farmers choosing mechanized harvesting equipment over the migrant worker's hand.

Belmanes lights a cigarette and, holding it between his large, calloused fingers, takes a long drag. ``If they let me, I would work more," he said, the lines in his face deepening as he talks. ``My family in Mexico needs the money."

The men don't seem to notice the three children running from the table to the outhouse a stone's throw from the camp.

Pascual's eyes eventually fix on them as they run back to where the men are sitting. Dulce takes a seat in a chair and falls off, trying to get her father's attention. They all laugh.

``All I want is a better life for my children," Pascual said. ``That's why we are all here, here as a family."

His children run off, again toward the outhouse, screaming with laughter along the way. Pascual sits back in his seat, a contemplative look on his face as he watches them play. He adjusts a baseball cap emblazoned with the word ``America" on his head and sighs.

State pulls licenses from 2 adult foster homes

Sunday, July 09, 2006

By Sarita Chourey

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The state of Michigan is revoking operating licenses for two Kalamazoo adult foster homes run by Residential Opportunities, Inc., after a state investigation found the non-profit at fault in the death of a resident last year.

"We have a constant review process that goes on with all of our experiences as an organization," said Executive Director Scott Schrum. "We have certainly reviewed this situation thoroughly."

He said the state's intention to revoke licenses for Fraternity Village and Alamo Group Home is the first time in ROI's 28-year history that the state has attempted to revoke its operating licenses, prompting ROI to appeal both decisions.

ROI helps those with physical or developmental disabilities live independently. It houses 220 people in 20 residential facilities around Kalamazoo County and provides care to 100 people who live in private residences.

In November a 45-year-old man with mental retardation died because he was not given medicine to prevent constipation, according to an investigation completed in January by the Department of Human Services Office of Children and Adult Licensing.

The man lived at Alamo Group Home, a six-person home located at 2725 Alamo Ave., for nine days before he died from severe intestinal blockages, according to the investigation. The state alleges ROI staff did not follow a physician's orders to give the resident laxatives.

The resident could not speak and suffered from autism and epilepsy

An investigation of Alamo Group Home by the **Michigan Department of Human Services** found that attendants of the resident who died last November did not follow his physician's instructions for treating constipation. The report cites "numerous medication errors" and repeated violations established in 2004, when ROI had to submit a corrective action plan to address violations at Alamo. The facility received its first license in 2002 and received a two-year renewal from the state in 2004.

Before the resident who died moved to Alamo, he had lived for 4 1/2 years at Fraternity Village, 1331 Fraternity Village.

ROI closed Fraternity Village in November, two months before the state revoked its license. Schrum said ROI sold Fraternity Village to a property owner who was interested in adding it to his other student-housing properties months before the incident identified in the investigation. The organization is trying to reverse the state's decision, he said, to prevent it from becoming a permanent part of ROI's record on file with the state.

In 2004 Fraternity Village staff discovered bruises and scrapes on a resident. The state cited Fraternity Village for not providing safety and protection to its resident.

“Staff should have been aware of the bruises, should have had some idea of how the bruising occurred, and should have followed through in reporting the bruises,” according to the state report.

In 2005 Fraternity Village was cited for not properly tracking the health data of another resident, who suffered from profound mental retardation and other conditions.

An investigation of Fraternity Village dated January 2006 found that the staff did not administer the resident's medication correctly and that they did not consult a physician or pharmacy when they changed the resident's medication. Fraternity Village was also cited for not producing complete medical records for investigators and for failing to document the resident's specific health conditions.

The home received its original license in 1983 and housed six residents with physical handicaps and developmental disabilities. Its most current license, issued in August of 2005, would have kept it open until August 2007 had ROI not decided to sell the property.

Most providers who have lost their licenses appeal the state's decision, according to Maureen Sorbet, spokeswoman for the Department of Human Services.

“We fully expect that in going through that process, the recommendation to revoke the licenses will be overturned,” Schrum said.

No appeals hearing has been scheduled yet for ROI.

In the past 21 months, only one out of 24 appeals by care providers across the state succeeded in overturning the state's decision.

Roann Bonney, director of Kalamazoo Community Mental Health Services, which investigates foster homes, declined to comment on the investigations of the two facilities, but said in an e-mail, “Residential Opportunities, Inc. has been an excellent contractual provider to Kalamazoo Community Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services for many years.”



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News Release

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Michigan Department of Human Services Summarily Suspends the Group Day Care Home License #DG090277022 of Cheri Gomez

July 7, 2006

The Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS), Office of Children and Adult Licensing issued an order of summary suspension and notice of intent to revoke the license of Bay County group day care home provider Cheri Gomez, 408 South Madison, Bay City, Michigan. This action resulted from a recent investigation of a complaint of the child day care group home.

The July 7, 2006, complaint investigation found violations of the Child Care Organizations Act and administrative rules regarding supervision, caregiver responsibilities, assistant caregivers, records of caregiving staff, children's records and exit and escape requirements. OCAL took emergency action to protect the health, welfare, and safety of children.

Effective 6:00 p.m., July 7, 2006, the Summary Suspension Order prohibits Cheri Gomez from operating a group day care home at 408 South Madison, Bay City, Michigan or at any other address or location. Accordingly, she may not accept children for care after that date and time. The order also requires Ms. Gomez to inform all of the parents of children in her care that her license has been suspended and that she can no longer provide day care.

Ms. Gomez has held a license to operate a group day care home since October 19, 2005. The license was for twelve children.

Michigan law defines a group day care home as a private home in which more than six but not more than 12 minor children are given care and supervision for periods of less than 24 hours a day, unattended by a parent or legal guardian, except children related to an adult member of the family by blood, marriage, or adoption. Group day care home includes a home that gives care to an unrelated minor child for more than four weeks during a calendar year.

For more information, consult DHS Web site at www.michigan.gov/dhs.